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THE DOCTRINES

OF THE

TRINITY AND TRANSUBSTANTIATION

COMPARED.

[George Ripley]

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LETTER

TO

A TRINITARIAN FRIEND.

My Respected Friend, — In the course of conversation last evening, when you undertook the defence of the Trinity, I was forcibly impressed with the power of mystery to charm the finest understandings. You appeared to be attached to the doctrine, not so much because you were struck with the strength of argument in its favor, from revelation or from reason, as because your imagination was fascinated by its very indefiniteness and obscurity. In your mind, the same grandeur was associated with the mystery of the Trinity, which belongs to the mysteries of our own being, of the operations of Providence, of the system of nature. But I confess, that to me the Trinity recalls no such emotions. Instead of classing it with those sublime subjects of thought, which are suggested by our condition in this world, and our hopes of a future, I should place it among those fictitious creations of a strange fancy, of which the dark ages were fertile.

I have always thought, — and I was confirmed in the opinion by your conversation, — that the doctrine of the Trinity bore a striking analogy to the doctrine of Transubstantiation. You will not be offended, I am sure, with my freedom, if I proceed to point out to your notice some particulars, in which, it appears to me, the two doctrines are very similar.

1. The *statement* of each involves an apparent contradiction. The doctrine of Transubstantiation is, that the bread and wine, employed in the ordinance of the Lord's

Supper, are converted, after consecration by the priest, into the real body and blood of Jesus Christ. The elements retain the same outward appearance, but in reality are entirely changed. To the senses, they still seem to be common bread and wine; but faith regards them as the body and blood of our Lord. You acknowledge the impossibility of believing this. You confess, that no evidence could prove it to your mind. But is there not the same contradiction in the statement of the Trinity? — The statement is, 1. That there is but one God. 2. That the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three separate persons, each having his own mind, consciousness and will, — each sustaining different offices in the work of redemption. 3. That the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Ghost is God.

Now to my mind, this statement appears to present as palpable a contradiction, as the former. I cannot torture my intellect to perceive the possibility of either of these propositions. It is as easy for me to admit that what the evidence of my senses teaches me is wine, is in reality the blood shed on Calvary, eighteen hundred years ago, as to perceive, that the Father can be God; — the Son, God; — and the Holy Ghost, God, — and yet, that there is but one God. Both the propositions I cannot help regarding as contradictory and impossible.

2. The doctrine of Transubstantiation is defended by passages of Scripture, which, if admitted in their obvious and literal sense, are certainly indubitable proofs. Indeed, the language of our Saviour is more explicit on this point, than it is on the doctrine of the Trinity, as its warmest advocates, I presume, confess. The doctrine of Transubstantiation — unless we bring reason to our aid, in interpreting Scripture — is supported by direct quotations from the New Testament. "Except ye eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man, ye have no

life in you." "And he took the bread and said, this is my body, which is given for you." In like manner, "he took the cup and said, this is my blood." By these texts, the believers in Transubstantiation think they demonstrate their doctrine. But the man, who permits his common sense to operate, refutes them on the principles of criticism and sound reason, and shows that the language of Scripture is not to be pressed in its most obvious sense too closely, but that we must look beyond the letter to the spirit.

The analogy which the Trinity bears to this point, is that it is supported by some obvious passages of Scripture. You say that you are convinced of the truth of the doctrine by certain texts in which a triple distinction of the divine nature is implied; or by passages which appear to invest Jesus Christ with the attributes of the Deity. But are these passages as numerous or as forcible as those which the Catholic alleges in favor of Transubstantiation? Why do you not receive *them* in their literal sense? Plainly, because you exercise your reason and cannot admit an impossibility.

On the same grounds, I interpret the texts, apparently in favor of the Trinity, according to my reason. If your argument is just against the Catholic, mine is just against you. To maintain consistency, you must become a Catholic or a Unitarian. If you adopt an opinion, from the literal import of Scripture, without regard to the real import, you must believe in Transubstantiation; but if you refuse to believe a contradiction, though capable of a plausible support from Scripture, you must renounce the Trinity. The Catholic can retort upon you with precisely the same arguments with which you attack the Unitarian; why, then, will you not allow the latter the same advantage which you assume, in contending with the former?

3. The two doctrines agree in the mode of argument, by which they are supported. A Protestant, reasoning with a believer in Transubstantiation, would argue something in this way; "I cannot believe, as you assert, that the bread and wine of the eucharist are the real body and blood of our Lord, for the supposition contradicts the evidence of my senses. The bread, which is before me, to all appearance is unchanged. It has all the properties which belonged to it before. I perceive its form, color, taste, smell; and I am sure that these are the qualities of real bread."

But to this the Catholic replies; "I admit all that you have asserted. If you think you have made out any argument, you mistake the ground of dispute. You have proved nothing by proving that the element in question has the visible properties of bread; that is granted: but the ground we take is this; that, allowing all you have said, the bread is still, in a mysterious manner, the true body of Christ: its retaining the appearance of bread, is nothing against the conclusion; for our Saviour expressly said, 'this is my body.' Now we must admit this to support the consistency of Scripture. And after all, the whole subject is a solemn mystery, which is not to be investigated too closely by our carnal reason."

How similar the mode of reasoning adopted by the Trinitarian. We say, "that we do not believe the doctrine of the Trinity, because it is inconsistent with the divine Unity. We are convinced by the united testimony of Nature and Revelation, that the Lord our God is ONE LORD. Now, we cannot think at the same time, that he is THREE. Again, we find our Saviour continually spoken of in the New Testament, as the Son of God, — distinct from the Father — and inferior to him; we cannot then believe that he is God, equal with the Father."

To this you reply, "What you say is true. No one

doubts it. To press this point so closely, betrays ignorance of the controversy. Trinitarians hold to the Unity of God, and to the inferiority of the Son to the Father; but at the same time, they believe in the Trinity and the equality of the son with the Father. You gain nothing by proving that the knowledge of Jesus Christ is limited; we admit that, but believe too, that his knowledge is unlimited; you gain nothing by proving that this power was given him by the Father; we admit that, but believe too, that his power is underived and independent; you gain nothing by proving that he is the Son of God, and finite; we admit that, but believe too, that he is God, and infinite. To be sure it is a mystery; but we must submit our carnal reason to the teachings of Scripture."

Now, how this differs from the reasoning of the Roman Catholic, in favor of Transubstantiation, I am unable to perceive. But that reasoning you pronounce sophistical, contradictory, and absurd. You acknowledge that it tends to disturb the foundations of our knowledge and to weaken our confidence in all human opinions. Why then will you persist yourself in an argument, which in another application you see is palpably erroneous? I am sure, that your fair mind must confess the inconsistency, that I have pointed out, and be slow in condemning your brother for being unable to believe that the same being can know all things and yet know but in part; has received all his power from another, and yet possesses it independently; is finite and inferior to God, and infinite and equal to God; while your good sense and knowledge of scriptural interpretation prevents you from agreeing with the Catholic, that Christ intended to be literally understood, when he said this is my body and this is my blood, and the capacity of your mind disables you from believing that the substance, which you see before you, with all the properties of bread, is actually the flesh of the Son of God.

4. The two doctrines agree, in the support which they have received from men of eminent learning and piety. You say, that the doctrine of the Trinity has been the undisputed doctrine of the church for ages; that thousands have been nurtured, under the influence of its belief, in the principles of a deep and fervent piety; that volumes filled with erudition and argument have been written in its defence; and that the spirits of the just have clung to it in the hour of death, with a strong perception of its truth, and confidence in its power. You point me to the philosophic Leibnitz, the profound Boyle, the devout Doddridge, as witnesses to the truth of the Trinity, and by their testimony you are confirmed in your own belief.

But your argument goes too far. For, if it is good, it proves the mystery of Transubstantiation. If the authority of great names has power to prove that the idea of a Trinity is not inconsistent with the divine Unity, it can prove, also, that the bread of the eucharist is the body of the Lord, without doing violence to human reason. The same considerations, which apply to your doctrine, apply with equal force to the doctrine of the Roman Catholic. That has found advocates and believers among men of distinguished talent and learning. That has been the Orthodox doctrine for ages. That has shed a light over the dying bed. That can number among its adherents such names as Fenelon, Bossuet and Pascal, whose example might sanction any doctrine, which is capable of support by human authority. But what does it prove? Nothing. They were men, fallible men; and on this point, you acknowledge their mistake.— We regard in like manner the names which you adduce. We yield them the claim of intellect and piety, but believe they were in error: of course, their authority has no weight with us. For if we were influenced by the associations, which are suggested by the example of the great and good, in the history of

the church, we must not only believe the doctrine of the Trinity but the mystery of Transubstantiation.

5. Both agree, in having been deemed essential to salvation. One of the greatest supports, which the doctrine of the Trinity has received, is the idea that it is a fundamental point of Christianity. This gives you an advantage, in your arguments, with the great majority of inquirers, such as the Roman Catholic church well knows how to use. You tell a man, that the doctrine of the Trinity is true, and that unless he believes it, he hazards the interests of his soul. We tell a man, that the same doctrine is false; but we dare not add that its reception would endanger his salvation. Though by this course, we think we gain in consistency, we are sure we lose in power; though we adhere to Scripture, we lose sight of policy. If we could so far violate our convictions, as to declare that the future happiness of an individual is endangered by his reception of any speculative doctrine, we might present an appalling picture of the evil of believing the Trinity. We should then have an influence with the timid, the melancholy, the desponding, which you possess, but which we do not covet. We could appeal to the fears, with the strength, with which we would address the understanding. While then I concede to you the advantage for proselytism, which you enjoy, in making a belief in the Trinity essential to salvation, I must be permitted to remind you, that it is an advantage which you enjoy in common with the Roman Catholic, who makes a belief in Transubstantiation essential to salvation. He regards you with the same pity, for not being able to agree with him, which you manifest for the Unitarian, for not being able to agree with you. You lament over our blindness, in rejecting the Trinity; he laments with equal compassion over yours, in rejecting Transubstantiation. You warn me of the danger of attending a Unitarian

church; he will warn you of the danger of attending a Protestant church. If, then, I give in to your idea, that I must return to the pale of Trinitarianism, for safety and religious comfort, I must be consistent and follow my Catholic brother into the bosom of the Holy Mother of the church; for not a single argument can you bring to prove the necessity of a belief in the Trinity, which he cannot urge, with equal — I had almost said with tenfold force, to prove the necessity of a belief in Transubstantiation.

6. The two doctrines correspond in their origin. Neither of them, it is acknowledged, is contained in the recorded discourses of the Apostles. Neither is found in the confessions of faith required of the primitive converts. Neither is recognised in the earliest controversies, which agitated the church. No traces of the Trinity or of Transubstantiation are found in ecclesiastical history, until after the apostolic age. But after Christianity began to be corrupted by the speculations of philosophers, both the doctrines were developed and became the subjects of eager contention. You need not that I should inform you, that the doctrine of Transubstantiation received its present form, at the fourth council of the Lateran, in the year 1215, according to the decree of Pope Innocent the Third, who embodied in definite language, the floating opinions, that had risen like a mist, on the purity of the church. But you seem to have forgotten, that the Trinity, — though it dates from an earlier period — is proved by faithful history, to have sprung up subsequently to the times of the Apostles. On this point, you will give credit to a writer of your own sect, — the popular Mosheim — who was too candid, at least in this instance, to sacrifice historical accuracy to theological prejudice. In his account of the fourth century, having spoken of a certain "schismatic pestilence," which

troubled the church, he says, "In the year three hundred and seventeen a *new* contention arose in Egypt upon a subject of much higher importance and with consequences of a yet *more pernicious* nature. The subject of this fatal controversy, which kindled such deplorable divisions, in the Christian world, was the doctrine of *three persons in the Godhead;* a doctrine, which in the three preceding centuries, had happily escaped the vain curiosity of human researches, and been left undefined and undetermined by any particular set of ideas."

"The Emperor Constantine, looking upon the subject of this controversy as *a matter of small importance, and as little connected with the fundamental and essential doctrines of religion*, contented himself at first, with addressing a letter to the contending parties, in which he admonished them, to put an end to their disputes. But when the prince saw that his admonitions were without effect, and that the troubles and commotions which the passions of men too often mingle with religious disputes, were spreading and increasing daily, throughout the empire, he assembled at length, in the year 325, the famous council of Nice in Bithynia, wherein the deputies of the church universal were summoned to put an end to the controversy."

"And in the year 381, a hundred and fifty bishops, at the council of Constantinople, gave the finishing touch to what the council of Nice had left imperfect, and fixed in a full and determinate manner the doctrine of *three* Persons in *one* God, which is as yet received among the generality of Christians."

From this time, the Trinity obtained a strong place, among the doctrines of Orthodoxy, and though Calvin expressed his disapprobation of the word as barbarous and savoring of heathenism, and Melancthon bewailed the bloody tragedies that it would cause to be enacted, the Reformation did not destroy its roots, and it is still a

prevalent and essential doctrine in all the great churches of Christendom.

The doctrine of Transubstantiation flourished with equal vigor, through many an age of religious darkness, and though it would be too much to say, that it has gone to the tomb of once powerful errors, its springs of life are touched, and it cannot long survive. In this, also, it is my belief that the doctrine of the Trinity corresponds with it.

I will relieve your patience and close this long letter, by touching for a moment on this point. The progress of light and knowledge has been fatal to the belief of Transubstantiation: it will be equally fatal to a belief in the Trinity. I am convinced of this, by the qualifications and explanations, to which its advocates are now accustomed to resort. It is not trusted in its original mystery, but is softened and adorned by the additions of ingenious theologians. But it cannot stand the rude shock of an inquiring age. Reason will refuse to lend its testimony to support a contradiction. Charity will rejoice at the banishment of an error, which has embittered the hearts, and shed the blood of the saints. As the knowledge of the Scriptures increases, the arguments for the Trinity will diminish. Already, many passages once considered indubitable proofs, are given up by its enlightened advocates. Already, many texts apparently strong in favor of the Trinity, have been found to labor under such extreme suspicion, as to render them useless in theological controversy. The history of the past, the character of man, the tendencies of society, are to my mind convincing proofs that the mystery of the Trinity will be rejected from our system of belief, and that the hour cometh, yea, is now come, when the true worshippers shall worship the FATHER in spirit and in truth. That you may be one of the increasing number, who acknowledge the Father, as the only true God, and Jesus Christ, as his Messenger and Son, is the sincere prayer of

Your friend, G. R.